

## Battle of Lake Pokeguma

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### **BATTLE OF LAKE POKEGUMA. AS NARRATED BY AN EYE WITNESS.—BY REV. E. D. NEILL.**

Pokeguma is one of the “Mille Lacs,” or thousand beautiful lakes for which Minnesota is remarkable. It is about four or five miles in extent, and a mile or more in width.—Its shores are strewn with boulders that in a past geologic age have been brought by some mighty impetus from the icy north. Down to the water's edge grow the tall pines, through which, for many years, the deer have bounded, and the winds sighed mournfully, as they wafted away to distant lands the shriek of many Dakota or Ojibwa mothers, caused by the slaughter of their children.

This lake is situated on Snake river, about twenty miles above the junction of that stream with the St. Croix.—Though as late as the year 1700, the Dakotas have resided in this vicinity, for a long period it has been the abode of their enemies, the Ojibwas.

In the year 1836, missionaries of the American Board of Foreign Missions connected with the Congregational and Presbyterian denominations, came to reside among the Ojibwas was of Pokeguma, to promote their temporal and spiritual welfare. Their mission-house was built on the east side of the lake; but the Indian village was on an island not far from the shore. In a few years, several Indian families, among others that of the chief, were induced to build log houses around the mission. The missionaries felt, to use the language of one of them, that “the motives of the gospel had no more influence over the Indian, in themselves considered, than over the deer that he follows in the chase.” They therefore first encouraged the Indian to work, and always purchased of him his spare provisions. 11

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By aiding them in this way, many had become quite industrious. In a letter written in 1837, we find the following: "The young women and girls now make, mend, wash, and iron after our manner. The men have learned to build log houses, drive team, plough, hoe, and handle an American axe with some skill in cutting large trees, the size of which, two years ago, would have afforded them a sufficient reason why they should not meddle with them."

On May fifteenth, 1841, two young men had gone, by order of Mr. Jeremiah Russell , now of Sauk Rapids, then Indian farmer at Pokeguma, to the Falls of St. Croix, after a load of provisions. On the next day, which was Sunday, the news arrived there, that a Dakota war party, headed by Little Crow , of the Kaposia band, whose face is so familiar to the older citizens of St. Paul, was on the way to their village. Immediately they started back on foot to give the alarm to their relatives and friends.

They had hardly left the Falls, on their return, before they saw a party of Dakotas, stripped and bedaubed with vermillion, and preparing themselves for war. The sentinel of the enemy had not noticed the approach of the young men. A few yards in front of the Ojibwa youth sat two of the sons of Little Crow , behind a log, exulting, no doubt, in anticipation of the scalps in reserve for them at the lake. In the twinkling of an eye, these two young Ojibwas raised their guns, fired, and killed both of the chief's sons. The sentinel, who by his carelessness allowed them to pass, was a third son. The discharge of the guns revealed to him that an enemy was near, and as the Ojibwas were retreating, he fired, and mortally wounded one of the two.

Fiendish was the rage of the Dakotas at this disastrous surprise. According to custom, the corpses of the chief's sons were dressed, and then set up with their faces towards  
179 the country of their ancient enemies. The wounded Ojibwa was horribly mangled by the infuriated party, and his limbs strewn about in every direction. His scalped head was placed in a kettle, and suspended in front of the two Dakota corpses, in the belief that

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it would be gratifying to the spirits of the deceased, to see before them the bloody and scalpless head of one of their enemies.

Little Crow , disheartened by the loss of his two boys, returned with his party to Kaposia. But other parties were in the field. The Dakotas had divided themselves into three bands; and it was the understanding that one party was first to attack Pokeguma, and then retire. After the Ojibwas was supposed that the attack was over, the second party was to commence their fire, and after they had ceased to fight, the third party was to begin to slaughter.

The second party proceeded as far as the mouth of Snake river, but, supposing that the Ojibwas had discovered them, they turned back, and upon their arrival at the Falls of St. Croix, they were still more chagrined by hearing of the death of the sons of the Kaposia chief.

It was not till Friday, the twenty-first of May, that the death of one of the young Ojibwas sent by Mr. Russell to the Falls of St. Croix, was known at Pokeguma. The murdered youth was a son of one of those families who had renounced heathenism, and whose parents lived on the lake shore, in one of the log buildings, by the mission-house. The intelligence alarmed the Ojibwas on the island opposite the mission, and on Monday, the twenty-fourth, three young men left in a canoe to go to the west shore of the lake and from thence to Mille Lacs, to give intelligence to the Ojibwas there of the skirmish that had already occurred. They took with them two Indian girls, about twelve years of age, who were pupils of the mission 180 school, for the purpose of bringing the canoe back to the island. Just as the three were landing, twenty or thirty Dakota warriors, with a war whoop emerged from their concealment behind the trees, and fired into the canoe. The young men instantly sprang into the water, which was shallow, returned the fire, and ran into the woods, escaping without material injury.

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The little girls, in their fright, waded into the lake; and as in Indian warfare it is as noble to kill an infant as an adult, a delicate woman as a strong man, the Dakota braves, with their spears and war clubs, rushed into the water after the children and killed them. Their parents upon the island, heard the death cries of their children; and for a time the scene was one of the wildest confusion. Some of the Indians around the mission-house jumped into their canoes and gained the island. Others went into some fortified log huts. The attack upon the canoe, it was afterwards learned, was premature. The party upon that side of the lake were ordered not to fire, until the party stationed in the woods near the mission commenced.

There were in all one hundred and eleven Dakota warriors, and the fight was in the vicinity of the mission-house, and the Ojibwas mostly engaged in it were those who had been under religious instruction. The rest were upon the island. During the engagement, an incident occurred, as worthy of note as some of those in Grecian history.

The fathers of the murdered girls, burning for revenge, left the island in a canoe, and drawing it up on the shore, hid behind it, and fired upon the Dakotas and killed one. The Dakotas advancing upon them, they were obliged to escape. The canoe was now launched. One lay on his back in the bottom; the other plunged into the water, and holding the canoe with one hand, and swimming with the other, he towed his friend out of danger. The Dakotas, infuriated at their escape, fired volley after volley at the swimmer, but he escaped the balls by putting his head under water whenever he saw them take aim, and waiting till he heard the discharge, when he would look and breathe.

After a fight of two hours, the Dakotas retreated with a loss of two men. At the request of the parents, Mr. E. F. Ely, now of Oneota, from whose notes the writer has obtained these facts, being at that time a teacher at the mission, went across the lake, with two of his friends, to gather the remains of his murdered pupils. He found the corpses on the shore. The heads cut off and scalped, with a tomahawk buried in the brains of each, were set up in the sand near the bodies. The bodies were pierced in the breast, and the right arm

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of one was taken away. Removing the tomahawks, the bodies were brought back to the island, and in the afternoon were buried in accordance with the simple but solemn rites of the Church of Christ, by members of the mission.

It is usual for Indians to leave their murdered on or near the battle-field, with their faces looking towards the enemy's country; and on Wednesday the Ojibwas started out in search of the Dakotas that had been killed. By following the trail, they soon found the two bodies, and scalped them. One of the heads was also cut off and brought to the island, to adorn the graves of the little girls. To a Northwestern savage, such a head-stone at a daughter's grave is more gratifying than one of sculptured Italian marble. Strips of flesh were fastened to the trees. A breast was also taken, and cooked and eaten by the braves to express their hatred to the Dakotas.

The mother and wife of the young man who had been killed by Little Crow's third son, were each presented with a hand. These women had been accustomed to attend preaching at the mission house, and knew the principles of the Prince of Peace. Though they had in 1839, lost many relatives by an attack from the Dakotas, on Rum river, they engaged in no savage orgies, but withdrawing to their wigwam, they placed the hands of their foes upon their knees, gazed in silence, then wrapped them in white muslin and interred them. Such is one of the many similar scenes that has occurred in our own Territory within ten years. The president of the Historical Society, in his address of 1851, well remarked, that the region between the falls of St. Croix and Mille Lacs, is a "Golgotha"—a place of skulls.

The sequel to this story is soon told. The Indians of Pokeguma, after the fight, deserted their village, and went to reside with their countrymen near Lake Superior.

In July of the following year, a war party was formed at Fond du Lac, about forty in number, and proceeded towards the Dakota country. When they reached Kettle river, they were joined by the Ojibwas, of St. Croix and Mille Lacs, and thus numbered about one

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hundred warriors. Sneaking, as none but Indians can, they arrived unnoticed at the little settlement, below St. Paul, commonly called "Pig's Eye," which is opposite Kaposia, or Little Crow's village. Finding an Indian woman at work in the garden of her husband, a Canadian, by the name of Gamelle , they killed her; also another woman, with her infant, whose head was cut off. The Dakotas, on the opposite side, were mostly intoxicated; and flying across in their canoes but half prepared, they were worsted in the encounter. They test about twelve warriors, and one of their number, known as The Dancer , the Ojibwas are said to have skinned.

Saint Paul , 1852.